

MUSIC

MUSIC COLLECTIVES: A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE

by A. Baron

For every band in the public eye topping the singles charts, and blasting their way across five continents raking in the megabucks, there are thousands who will never make it. They will never be a name. For many musicians this doesn't matter. Their commitment is to their music. As long as they can play, drink a few beers at the gig and break even over a period of time, they don't care if they never 'make it.' For them, the music is the thing.

Nevertheless, every performer likes to have someone hear him play. For those bands who only dream of emulating the Bon Jovi of this world, theirs is an alternative route, not necessarily to commercial success, but to bringing their music to the public. This is the music collective.

Although it does get some funding here and there, the collective is highly self-motivated, raising money from its own gigs. Bands sell their own tickets, do their own fly posting and promoting, and some of them play the circuit. This is a round of pubs and clubs which are regular rock venues, varying from the 'Crypt' night club and 'Mean Fiddler' pub to the internationally famous 'Marquis.'

To American readers the word 'collective' will probably sound reminiscent of the bad old days of pre-glasnost Russia. However, collectives, like co-ops, have a long and honourable tradition in the British Labour movement, and are not necessarily communist orientated, nor even political. A musician's collective in particular is a bunch of struggling, mostly unemployed, bands who come together under the aegis of a community or resources centre. They beg and scrape for funding, and organize their own gigs at whatever local venues they can muster. Many collectives tend to have a somewhat transient existence, possibly due to lack of commitment. They are sprinkled liberally around the country: Medway, Northampton, Coventry and farther north. One of, if not the most active group in the Greater London area is SELMC - the



The local pub gives an opportunity to perform.

South East London Musicians Collective.

SELMC grew out of Bromley Unemployed Group, which gives the alluring acronym BUG. Although he is loathe to take any credit, the founding father and driving influence behind the collective since its inception, has been Tom Caldwell, a 44 year-old community worker. Tom, a transplanted Scotsman who is studying for his MA, played in various bands throughout the Sixties and Seventies, although he currently has no musical aspirations of his own.

In January 1986 BUG decided to expand its small cultural group to include unemployed musicians and look at the need for facilities in the borough. They soon established that existing facilities for gigging were very limited indeed. So Tom, as BUG's co-ordinator, got in touch with local bands and, in February, Bromley Music Collective (BMC) was formed. Starting with a modest £50 grant from BUG, the collective began scouring round for funding. According to SELMC's lighting manager and sometime lyricist, Torquil Macrae, after approaching local businesses, BUG received one donation: a £5 gift voucher from Boots! However, BMC itself did eventually obtain funding from the soon to be abolished GLC (Greater London Council). After lengthy discussion they also managed to secure a regular venue: Friday nights at Bromley Labour

Club's hall, the HG Wells Centre. This worked well until September '86 when they were unceremoniously booted out amidst allegations of drug taking and violence. A collective spokesman insisted the whole thing had been greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, they had to find another venue, which was the Tiger's Head at Lee in the neighbouring borough of Lewisham.

The collective was successful during the rest of 1986, organizing rock schools, numerous benefit gigs, a fanzine, compilation tape and, perhaps most ambitious of all, a free one day concert at the outdoor Crystal Palace Concert Bowl, featuring twelve bands. However, in early 1987 Bromley Council withdrew all funding from BUG. Tom Caldwell moved from Bromley to the voluntary section in Lewisham, becoming the head man at Catford Centre for the Unemployed. The music collective moved with him and merged with two other collectives: thus SELMC was born. Although it hasn't exactly mushroomed SELMC has been successful, if not in strictly commercial terms, then in giving new bands exposure and bringing their music to the public. In the summer of 1987 another free concert was organized at Crystal Palace. This time thirteen bands performed, and the gig was recorded for a compilation.

A regular Friday night 'cabaret' featur-

ing non-music acts as well as SELMC bands was tried, but failed. However, gigs were regularly held at the Greyhound in Sydenham, (a well known South London venue), and the Black Horse in Catford. Currently SELMC has a regular booking at Lewisham Labour Club, but individual bands run many of their own gigs. The collective provides subsidised van hire, poster and ticket printing facilities and even free publicity. Alex from 'Riff Raff' liaises with local press and radio regularly. In fact, when I interviewed Tom and Torquil for this article a meeting was being held at SELMC HQ for a visiting Spanish band and Greenwich community radio.

At present SELMC has a floating membership of about twenty-five bands. Despite Tom's efforts to encourage a broader based membership, (in particular to recruit more females!), SELMC reflects the rock music scene and is predominantly male, white and youthful. Bands vary from Heavy Metal (The Brain of Morbius, Grey Dome and others) to pop/rock bands. The roll call includes: Baby Trio, Yu, Best Foot Forward, Fustylug, You Pesky Kids, and the delightfully named Screaming Custard.

Without doubt, SELMC's greatest achievement to date has been a cultural exchange. In 1988, while the ubiquitous and evergreen Tom Caldwell was taking a working holiday in Spain engineering for Cut The Wire (who have since broken up), he met Paco Cabrera. Paco was well in with several Spanish bands and with the Ajuntamente (local council) of the city of Terrassa. Initially it was agreed that they would arrange for one Spanish band to tour London. The Ajuntamente stepped in and expanded the project, financing it to the tune of some £10,000, Spanish equivalent. In stark contrast, Lewisham council donated £150! "This has become a standing joke," commented Torquil Macrae. Other London councils, although approached, contributed nothing. The result of this was that Best Foot Forward visited Spain in February of this year and Spanish three piece, Codico Neurotico came to London in March.

Recently SELMC applied for charitable status, but were turned down by the commission. They plan to reapply, but meanwhile the collective continues to chug along. They meet regularly at the Catford Centre at 20 Holbeach Road at

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Only tourists open the A to Zed in public. A Londoner wouldn't be caught dead consulting it on the tube. He will sneak off to the loo for a discreet peak when venturing into an unknown part of the city. You might also pick up a copy of "City Limits" or "Time Out." The entertainment listings are current and helpful, and with a copy tucked under your arm, you might also pass for a yuppie native.

Thus equipped, your next move should be towards a public house and a friendly pint. It is prudent to avoid any establishment with the words "Cockney" or "Dickens" over the door. The beer will certainly be overpriced, and the clientele will be comprised of American and German tourists. Order ale and lager by the pint or half-pint and do not, under any circumstances, request a chilled mug. Drink deeply, smack your lips and say, "Wow, this sure beats Budweiser" (it does). The bartender is bound to smile. Smile back and sweep your change off the counter, as you needn't feel compelled to leave a tip. If you sit quietly in a corner, you may well hear a chorus of "Long Way to Tipperary." It is not advisable for Americans of vaguely Irish descent to wax sentimental over "the Olde Country" or sigh knowingly about "the Troubles."

Many of London's most distinctive features aren't British at all. The city attracts tourists and business travellers from all over the world, and has large immigrant communities, which make a substantial contribution to London's cultural life. It is not unusual to hear conversations in four different languages. It is in this international context, unfortunately, that the American foot often finds its way into the renowned American mouth. I once had a painful experience on the train between Hammersmith and Picadilly, involving an American compatriot (her mid-February tan and Guatemalan bracelet screamed 'California') and two gentlemen, who

were conversing in a foreign language. She leaned across the aisle, smacking her gum, and nudged one of the surprised travellers. "So where you from?" she asked at the top of her voice. One of the men smiled awkwardly and replied, "Sri Lanka." "Say, wow! Where is that?" The men patiently explained that their island homeland is located off the southern coast of India. The most intelligent question Miss California could muster was some vague query about the beaches and opportunities for surfing. She intruded upon their proud description of the island's coasts, asking, "So what do you guys do there? Work for Club Med?" The polite smiles disappeared, and one of the men said, "No, we are Tamil refugees." Such embarrassing conversations can be prevented by a half-hour with an atlas, and an occasional glance at a newspaper. Surely such preparation deserves as much attention as, say, the packing of one's suitcase.

A good way to get a taste of London's international character is dining out. I managed to avoid the notorious English cuisine for months, by patronizing Indian and Chinese restaurants in Shepherd's Bush. I have yet to encounter the dreaded black pudding. The best strategy for the adventurous and thrifty diner is to avoid West End restaurants altogether; venture into Finsbury Park or Streatham for Indian food. If you are loathe to leave the city centre, search around for a Persian or African restaurant, or head for Chinatown, which is worth seeing anyway. A good general gauge of the cuisine's quality and authenticity is a dearth of Western faces among the patrons.

Enjoy a long wander around London. Follow a few simple standards of conduct, and you will be welcome back in the future. Along the way, thank everyone so much indeed, and part with the word "cheers" in less formal circumstances. And please, whatever you do, remember not to say anything untoward about the Queen. She's a nice lady.

7pm on Wednesdays. Here, decisions are made and printing undertaken, as well as reports on past and future gigs.

Although it hasn't yet produced any superstars, the achievements of SELMC and other collectives are not to be underrated. They enable new and struggling

bands to bring their music to the public, give them encouragement and, perhaps most of all, the mutual support without which many of them would never get off the ground.